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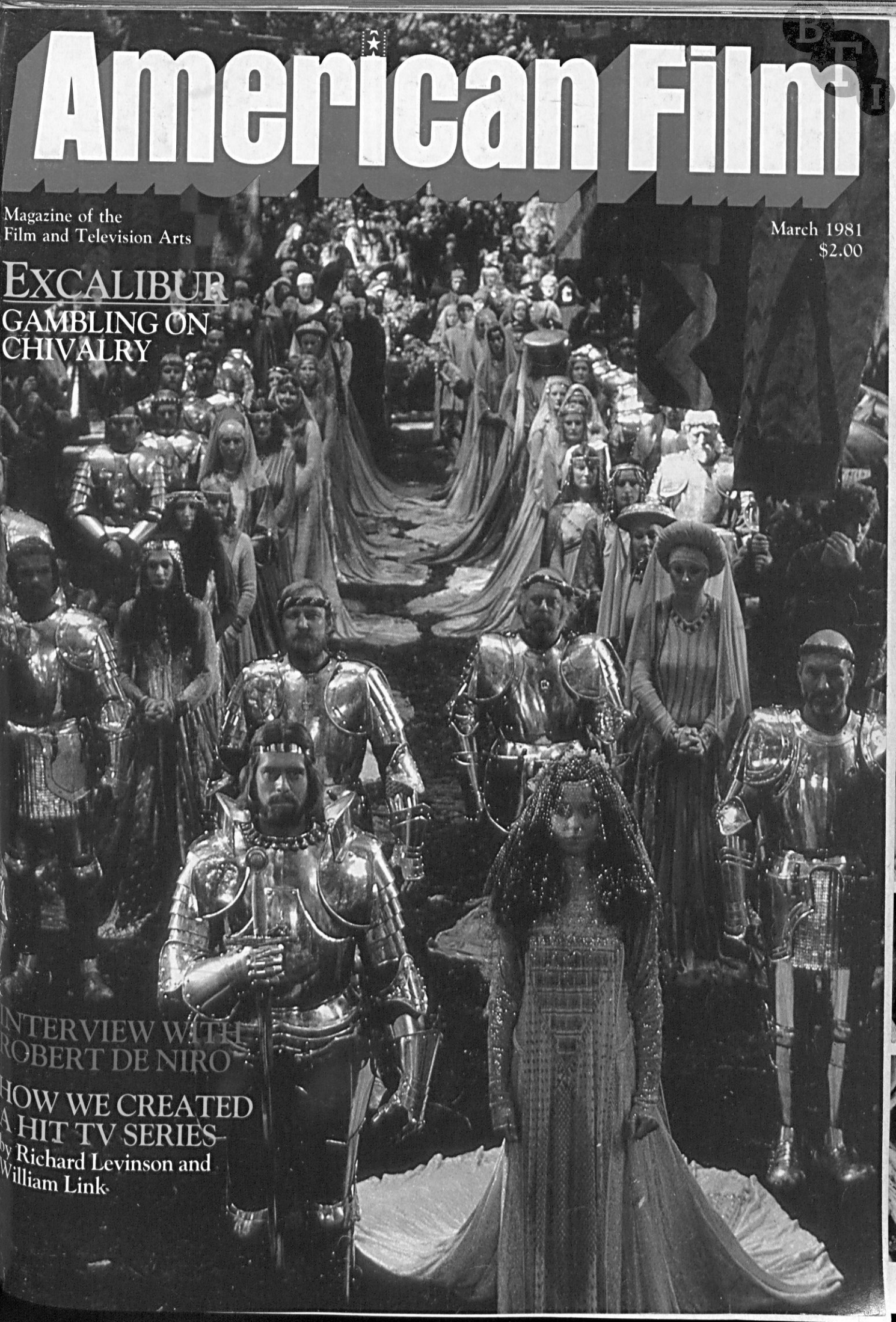

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Sympathy for the Devil

J. Hoberman

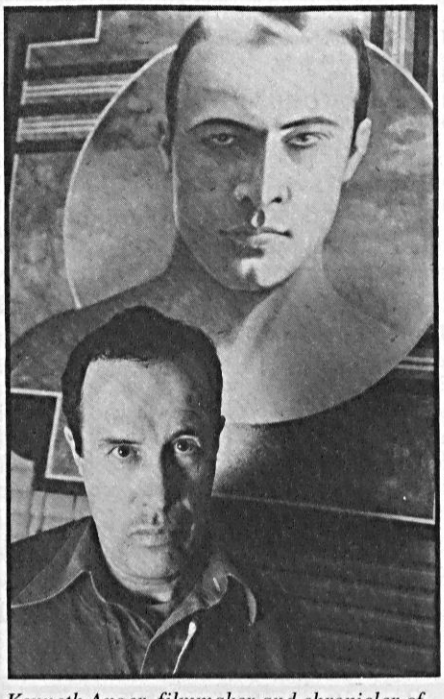
After a long period spent wandering in the wilderness, Kenneth Anger has finally premiered "Lucifer Rising," his first finished film in nearly a dozen years.

Underground movies, as avant-garde films were called in the mid-sixties, were defined by three names: Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, and Jack Smith. Bad boys all, their otherwise disparate films were characterized by an atmosphere of liberated decadence, a mocking attitude toward Hollywood, and a taboo-breaking explicitness. All three made cause célèbre films that resulted in court cases. Ironically, the floodgates for pornography were opened by such exceptional (and relatively mild) films as Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and Anger's "Scorpio Rising," both shown in 1963. What happened to these pioneers?

Flaming Creatures aside, Smith never actually completed another film, although he has screened several works in progress and has continued to produce slide shows and theater pieces. Warhol's real film career ended with the attempt on his life in 1968; he thereafter ceded artistic control of his films to assistant Paul Morrissey. Anger, an independent filmmaker since the forties, proved to be the most resilient of the three. After a long period spent wandering in the wilderness, he has finally premiered "Lucifer Rising," his first finished film in nearly a dozen years.

The last of the bad boys, Anger is also the only avant-garde filmmaker to have a sheen of show biz glamour: He's as well known for *Hollywood Babylon*, his luridly written compendium of movieland scandal, as he is for his films. Shuttling between Hollywood, Paris, New York, San Francisco, and London, he has developed associations that range from Jean Cocteau and Anaïs Nin to members of the Manson family and the Rolling Stones. Anger is an acolyte of the English magus Aleister Crowley. He sees "Magick" as his calling and equates making a film with casting a spell. The interplay of pop culture and occult ritual is central to his aesthetic. Although Anger perceives Lucifer sympathetically, he once said, "The only devil I've ever worshiped is Mickey Mouse."

There is a temptation to view this artist as his own magnum opus. Born fifty-one years ago in Santa Monica, he grew up in Hollywood, where his grandmother had been a costume mistress in silent films. According to Anger, he attended dancing school with Shirley Temple and played the part of the princeling in Max Reinhardt's 1935 film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He began making his own 16mm movies using neighborhood kids (including John Derek) long before he graduated from Hollywood High. At seventeen, Anger provoked perhaps the first scandal of American avant-garde film with his astonishingly accomplished "Fireworks." Made one weekend when his parents were away, the film is an ironic, overtly sadomasochistic and homosexual psychodrama that features Roman candle phalluses and a sailor-filled men's room.



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Kenneth Anger, filmmaker and chronicler of Hollywood, with part of his Valentino collection.

"Fireworks' " perverse vision was better received in Europe than at home. "One fan letter from Cocteau and I hightailed it to Paris," Anger recalls. He spent most of the next dozen years there, finishing one film—the poetic nocturne "Eaux d'artifice" (1953)—while working on a number of ambitious, but never completed, projects, including versions of *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *The Story of O*. On a trip back to Hollywood in 1954, he was able to shoot and complete his first color film, "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome," a kind of Eucharistic masquerade inspired by Crowley's writings.

After more than a decade abroad, Anger returned to live in the United States, staying at the Brooklyn apartment of filmmakers Marie Menken and Willard Maas. "It was a little like visiting a foreign country," he says. "Brooklyn was as strange to me as darkest Africa." He discovered a gang of motorcyclists hanging out in Coney Island and was inspired to make a "documentary" about their lives. The result was "Scorpio Rising" (1963), surely the most widely seen film in the history of the American avant-garde.

With its self-conscious media quotations, mock-heroic view of urban youth culture, knowing homoeroticism, and smashing use of rock 'n' roll (Anger was as impressed by the existence of transistor radios as he was by the sight of the leather-clad bikers and their "surreal" machines), "Scorpio Rising" burst dramatically on the American scene. If its acceptance was not completely universal—the Los Angeles Police Department confiscated the print during its initial midnight run, and Anger was sued by the American Nazi party for "desecrating" the swastika—no other underground

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movie has ever had a comparable effect on Hollywood production. *The Wild Angels, Midnight Cowboy, Easy Rider, Mean Streets*, and *American Graffiti* can all be seen as part of its ripple effect.

Not the least important aspect of the film's influence was Anger's dense, almost subliminal editing style. It's a truism that television commercials are heir to the theories of Sergei Eisenstein, but I'd venture that Madison Avenue learned more about the power of associative montage from "Scorpio Rising" than *The Battleship Potemkin*. Although the rise of structuralism severely mitigated Anger's influence within the avant-garde of the early seventies, "Scorpio Rising" has the same relationship to the recent Super-8 punk films as Gogol's *Overcoat* was said to have had to modern Russian literature. Filmmakers Eric Mitchell, Beth and Scott B, and Vivienne Dick have, all in their own ways, come out of Anger's leather jacket.

On the strength of "Scorpio's" success, Anger set out to make a movie about the teenage custom-car aficionados of Southern California. He never got the funding he needed, and the project was abandoned in favor of a "religious film" on "today's new tribes of teenagers, turned-on children—teenyboppers and adolescent hippies." It was to be Anger's "birthday party for the Aquarian Age," the antithesis of "Scorpio's" "Thanatos in chrome, black leather, and bursting jeans." This was "Lucifer Rising," the film over which he would labor for nearly fifteen years.

Remnants of "Lucifer's" first version, shot in summer-of-love San Francisco and destroyed by its star, Bobby Beausoleil, before he joined the Manson family, were ultimately recycled as "Invocation of My Demon Brother" in 1969. A baleful, deliberately abrasive work (embodying the chaos of the sixties with an authenticity only suggested by *Apocalypse Now* or *Who'll Stop the Rain*), "Invocation" is set to a moog-synthesized accompaniment composed by Mick Jagger. The score, which sounds like a car engine in its death throes, perfectly complements Anger's frenzied montage. Having thus purged himself, he began a new version of "Lucifer," using locations in Iceland, England, Germany, and Egypt.

Anger calls his new film "almost a psychodrama for the people who were in it." He plans to release two more sections as soon as he can raise the money to complete them.

In its definitive version, Anger's "sympathetic view of what's usually called the devil" opens with a brilliant smear of color—red smoke billowing into a midnight blue sky, golden rivulets of lava streaming from a fiery pit. There's a shot of storm clouds lowering over the sea, and then, in burnished metal letters that cast their orange reflection over the waves, the rubric L-U-C-I-F-E-R R-I-S-I-N-G shoots up from the horizon like an apocalyptic sunrise.

Inspired by Crowley's "Hymn to Lucifer," the film is a shoestring amalgam of DeMille and Méliès: half pagan spectacle and half playful conjuring trick. Stage sequences are interpolated with all manner of found or stock footage, cannily edited for their maximum montage magic, and washed in a score of vintage acid rock (composed by Beausoleil from his prison cell). But "Lucifer Rising" does have a plot: A bare-breasted Isis and a blue-faced Osiris (British director Donald Cammell) materialize amid the ruins of ancient Thebes and begin signaling each other. Their stately exchange triggers a succession of voluptuous natural disasters (storms, volcanoes, plagues), eventually rousing Lucifer's adept, a youthful hippie in a quilted rainbow robe. Lilith (Marianne Faithfull) rises from a Celtic stone sarcophagus and leads a torchlit procession up to Stonehenge as a magus (Anger) activates a magic circle to herald Lucifer's actual ascension. There are a few more celebratory cataclysms, and then—in a bit of understated optical wizardry that I wouldn't trade for every trick in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—a coral-colored flying saucer appears in the unnaturally turquoise Sahara sky, hovering like a halo over a pharaoh's monument.

There are moments when this often-startling assemblage—a pop cabala of occult symbols, mystical color correspondences, and arcane references—seems perilously overwrought, more literary and less visceral than previous Anger films. The vicissitudes of Anger's fifteen-year struggle with his material may account

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From "Lucifer Rising"—"a shoestring amalgam of DeMille and Méliès": Myriam Gibril as Isis, Donald Cammell as Osiris.

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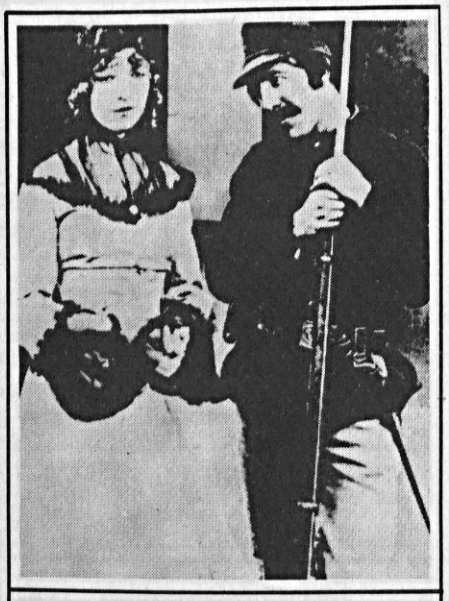

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EXPLORATIONS

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for this static quality, but buoyed by the lush, hypnotic score and propelled by the filmmaker's conviction, the work attains loopy, undeniable grandeur.

Anger calls his new film "almost a psychodrama for the people who were in it," and he plans to release two more sections as soon as he can raise the money to complete them. Part two will contain "some humorous elements" (including the title, "I Love Lucifer") as it goes from the mythological to the particular, showing the gods and goddesses of part one in human incarnations, as well as dealing with the celluloid deities of Hollywood.

Much of the film will be shot in Anger's apartment, which he refers to as his movie studio. Actually, this four-room flat, located in the upper, unfashionable reaches of Manhattan's Yorkville section, is a virtual film museum. Lighted by candles and a huge, blinking electric star, Anger's red-on-red living room is crammed with all manner of movie memorabilia, including a framed Rudolph Valentino contract, one of the neon violins designed by Busby Berkeley for "The Shadow Waltz" number in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and a chunk of the original facade of Radio City Music Hall. Anger owns what may be the world's largest Valentino collection, but he's planning to sell it to the University of Texas to finance "Lucifer's" sequel.

As with any independent film artist, a conversation with Anger soon turns to the problem of money. "Lucifer Rising" was made hand to mouth with money from West German television, the American Federation of Arts, New York State's Creative Artists Public Service program, and a host of private sources. Anger estimates that he needs at least $50,000 to bring his "Lucifer" cycle to completion. A publisher has offered him a sizable advance for a follow-up to *Hollywood Babylon*; he isn't thrilled about the idea—"It's a year and a half of salt mine work"—but it's an offer he can't refuse.

"I wouldn't work like this if I could possibly figure out another way," Anger says. "Film is my life, but it's like making a painting out of real gold and jewels." With Lucifer's help, part two may not take another fifteen years. ■

Kenneth Anger's complete works are distributed by the American Federation of Arts Film Program, 41 East 65th St., New York, NY 10021